

Learning to Lead: Mind Games for Middle Managers

Sheryl Morgan

Wintec

Sheryl Morgan is the Project Development Manager at Wintec, a large Institute of Technology in Hamilton, New Zealand, which offers vocational and professional education from trade through to postgraduate level. A professional project manager, with international accreditation, she has held various roles in the tertiary sector over the last 20 years. When not coaching and training people in project management and managing high risk strategic projects, she has acted as a transition manager in corporate areas for everything from Enrolment and Human Resources to Business Development and Learning Support. Always willing to accept a challenge, she's currently in the Faculty, acting as the Head of the School of Business most recently

Tertiary institutions have embraced the distributed leadership model with enthusiasm. Newly appointed middle managers have found themselves empowered to lead overnight, and resemble possums in the headlights, frozen by the traffic coming in from either side. New leaders struggle with the incompatible demands of the role, described in the Integrated Competing Values Framework. Some in-house research showed a recently appointed middle management tier of staff reporting difficulty with aspects of the role. They were confident enough about getting the job done, caring for staff, and managing performance. However, they are expected to lead change, influence others, and challenge assumptions in a transformational leadership style, while operating in an organisational environment they do not necessarily understand. Six months into the job, we asked what areas of their role they were finding most challenging. Those completely new to the organisation struggled with "the way we do things around here" and "who to ask get things done". Although mentoring programmes were in place with a more senior manager they weren't enough to acquire the organisational knowledge needed. Understanding the way things are done around here is often the result of years of experience that cannot simply be transmitted in a Vulcan mind meld, so how do managers acquire that judgement and experience?

Research has shown that teaching strategies using scenarios, or "war stories", to help learners problem solve are very effective, and a rich source of organisational learning when used with staff. Having managers problem solve familiar or recurring issues, in an environment they recognise, develops the high level analytical skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, generating the new learning that the organisation wants from its leaders. In the organisation's in-house staff development programme, the effectiveness of scenarios was applied to game playing, also known to be a very effective way of improving student learning. A board game was developed in which players were given brief scenarios of common project management problems the organisation had experienced. Players had to solve these to the satisfaction of their colleagues as they moved through the process of managing a project from beginning to end on the board game. Each player had a different group of project management skills available to them and they could negotiate, or bribe their colleagues with coffee and chocolate, to assist them if the skills they had been allocated in the game did not resolve the problems they had been given. It gave fellow players an insight into the way colleagues thought and what management skills they applied to solve typical organisational challenges, and helped kinaesthetic and visual learners in applying new skills. The experience confirmed research on the effectiveness of game playing which shows improved recall, understanding and problem solving skills, increased participation and collaboration, and the development of a culture where colleagues learn from each other. And staff enjoyed themselves, all of which has made project management training the flagship of the organisation's management development programme.